

REFERENCE 1

May 30, 2001

Memo on Standards Focus Groups

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CFSAN contracted with Research Triangle Institute (RTI) to do a series of focus groups on consumer attitudes toward food standards of identity. RTI presented their results and conclusions in their final report for CFSAN, "Consumer Attitudes Toward Potential Changes in Food Standards of Identity" (September 28, 2000). The results also appeared in a subsequent paper, "Consumer Attitudes Toward Food Standards of Identity" (Cates et al, *Journal of Consumer Research*, forthcoming.) In general, CFSAN agrees with the basic conclusions RTI presented in those publications.

Some important results and findings were as follows:

- 1) Opinion of participants on standards of identity were not uniform, but ran the gamut from those who felt that such standards are always necessary to those who felt that such standards are never necessary. The focus groups did not generate sufficient data to explain these differences; however, there was some suggestion that younger and more highly educated participants may have been more likely to think that such standards are unnecessary.
- 2) Many participants found standards of identity to be valuable. Although there was considerable variation, most participants tended to agree with common arguments advanced in favor of standards, and to disagree with common arguments made against standards. In particular, most participants felt that having uniform product names for products with certain defined characteristics made shopping easier. Most participants did not agree that standards hindered the variety of products available on the market; many participants pointed out the variety of new products bearing non-standard names that are now available. Although many participants said they would be less likely to try a product bearing a non-traditional name, it was unclear whether this reluctance was based on mistaken assumptions about the characteristics of the new products, or on a simple preference for the traditional products. Other participants said they would be just as likely to try a new product with a non-traditional name as with a traditional name. In general, more participants expressed concern about a perceived surfeit of choices and the resulting complexity of shopping than about a perceived lack of choices. Many participants were concerned about the time that would be required -- in the absence of standards of identity -- for ordinary market forces to eliminate what they would consider unacceptable products from the marketplace. However, many caveats exist with respect to these conclusions. For example, many participants appeared to have difficulty

separating health and safety issues from the issue of standards of identity. In addition, the focus groups tended to concentrate on the case of eliminating or changing existing standards of identity. Relatively little attention was directed to the current acceptability of products that have no standard of identity, and participants' beliefs about the need for standards for such products.

3) Some participants stated that standards are more important for some types of products than others and for some product characteristics than others. Many participants tended toward a blanket endorsement or rejection of standards of identity. However, to the extent that participants distinguished contexts, the general flavor of the discussion was that it was more important for standards to address characteristics that participants could not readily observe (such as ingredients in products with multiple, unrecognizable ingredients) than characteristics they could observe (such as appearance, size, or number). Participants were split in their opinion on the importance of specifying traditional processing methods in standards, at least in the hypothetical case in which new processing methods could generate products organoleptically identical to traditional products.

4) Participants stated that standards of identity should be based on consumer beliefs about the product characteristics implied by product names, and about minimum acceptable quality levels for particular products. In addition, participants believed that standards should be periodically revised on a case-by-case basis to accommodate changes in consumer beliefs, production technology, and ingredients. Most participants wanted consumers to play a role in the development of standards, and did not feel that CFSAN should rely solely on input from industry when developing standards. In addition, most participants felt that the decision to revise a given standard could only be made on a case-by-case basis.